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May 10, 1974

*Conference on  
Enzyme  
Engineering*

Dr. W.D. McElroy  
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Dear Bill,

I have your letter of May 3rd asking me about attending a conference on enzyme engineering in the latter part of July. This is an area in which I really am quite interested for a number of reasons but I regret that it comes at a rather awkward time from the standpoint of my personal plans, and I just do not see how I can attend. It is just possible that I might be able to get down for one day, including there and back and if you wished me to proceed on that basis, possibly Wednesday the 24th would be the preferred date. However, I could understand it if you did not want to complicate your organization in this way; and I do not think I could make a firm commitment even for that limited participation but rather just a contingent one.

Whether or not I am able to contribute anything, I am greedy enough to hope that I might get the benefit of your deliberations and would be very much interested in seeing your final document.

Besides the technical problems, I hope you will be giving some attention to the institutional and economic issues that inevitably complicate initiatives of this kind. Have you addressed such questions as to the character of impediments, if any, to private enterprise taking major responsibility for technical developments in this field. I am even concerned about the possibility that federally supported academic work in this technological area may even impede productive developments by industry on account of the inevitable problems of assignment of property rights and the possible discouragement of private initiatives if there is overt competition from publicly supported sources. Out of the spectrum of potential opportunities I am sure that there are some possibilities for which these considerations are much more cogent than others. This will have to do with the varying degrees of basic quality to the research that needs to be done, as well as to the other considerations that might interfere with market-oriented investment. Private industry is much more interested in the development of for example antibiotic producing strains which generate a sellable product than they would be in improved soil bacteria that could be economically even more important by benefits to agriculture. I do not know if the group you have assembled is the best qualified to look at this side of the problem and perhaps a different one would have to be put together for that particular purpose. I can think of one person

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whom you may already know, David Ben-Daniel who works for General Electric Corporation who is quite persuasively critical of a model of pure federal subsidy for technical (as opposed to scientific) investigation.

However, the intrinsic interest of the problem may override all of these other considerations, and I certainly wish you well.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr